

# Did TAZ (*Temporary Autonomous Zone*) Further Derail Anarchist Movements?



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## Introducing TAZ and its Children

Defining “*TAZ* (*Temporary Autonomous Zone*)” seems simple enough. Purportedly coined in 1985 by Hakim Bey (aka Ustad Selim aka Peter Lamborn Wilson),<sup>1</sup> the term ostensibly referred to a pre-existing phenomenon in which people gather together to create their own rules (or lack thereof) outside of or beyond the state. A liberal interpretation of the term would include something like a self-organized baseball tournament. A conservative interpretation might restrict its meaning to anarchist events that explicitly reject the presence of police and engage in some form of illegal activity or another.

The term took hold in anarchist scenes in the early-mid-90s through the popular underground book *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (1991) published by Autonomedia.

Some samples in Bey/Wilson’s own words:<sup>2</sup>

**Poetic Terrorism:** Weird dancing in all-night computer-banking lobbies. Unauthorized pyrotechnic displays. Land-art, earth-works as bizarre alien artifacts strewn in State Parks. Burglarize houses but instead of stealing, leave Poetic-Terrorist objects. Kidnap someone & make them happy. Pick someone at random & convince them they’re the heir to an enormous, useless & amazing fortune—say 5000 square miles of Antarctica, or an aging circus elephant, or an orphanage in Bombay [...] Later they will come to realize that for a few moments they believed in something extraordinary, & will perhaps be driven as a result to seek out some more intense mode of existence. [...] Go naked for a sign. Organize a strike in your school or workplace on the grounds that it does not satisfy your need for indolence & spiritual beauty. Graffiti-art loaned some grace to ugly subways & rigid public monuments—PT-art can also be created for public places: poems scrawled in courthouse lavatories, small fetishes abandoned in parks & restaurants, xerox-art under windshield-wipers of parked cars [...] PT is an act in a Theater of Cruelty which has no stage, no rows of seats, no tickets & no walls. In order to work at all, PT must categorically be divorced from all conventional structures for art consumption (galleries, publications, media). Even the guerilla Situationist tactics of street theater are perhaps too well known & expected now. An exquisite seduction carried out not only in the cause of mutual satisfaction but also as a conscious act in a deliberately beautiful life--may be the ultimate PT. The PTerrorist behaves like a confidence-trickster whose aim is not money but CHANGE. [...] Dress up. Leave a false name. Be legendary. The best PT is against the law, but don’t get caught. Art as crime; crime as art.

**Pirate Utopias:** To say that “I will not be free till all humans (or all sentient creatures) are free” is simply to cave in to a kind of nirvana-stupor, to abdicate our humanity, to define ourselves as losers. [...] In the end the TAZ is almost self-explanatory. If the phrase became current it would be understood without difficulty...understood in action.

**Waiting for the Revolution:** Revolution has never yet resulted in achieving this dream. The vision comes to life in the moment of uprising—but as soon as “the

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<sup>1</sup> For exposé on Bey/Wilson, see Michael Muhammad Knight, *William S. Burroughs vs. The Qur'an*. Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012. For obituaries, see: “Peter Lamborn Wilson, Advocate of ‘Poetic Terrorism,’ Dies at 76.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/11/us/peter-lamborn-wilson-dead.html> and “For Peter Lamborn Wilson/Hakim Bey (1945-2022)” <https://autonomies.org/2022/05/for-peter-lamborn-wilson-hakim-bey-1945-2022/>

<sup>2</sup> Selections from “Poetic Terrorism”, “Pirate Utopias”, “Waiting for the Revolution”, “Some Poetic-Terrorist Ideas Still Sadly Languishing in the Realm of ‘Conceptual Art’”, and “Against the Reproduction of Death” respectively (1991). Available online at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/eso/taz.htm>

Revolution” triumphs and the State returns, the dream and the ideal are already betrayed. I have not given up hope or even expectation of change—but I distrust the word Revolution. Second, even if we replace the revolutionary approach with a concept of insurrection blossoming spontaneously into anarchist culture, our own particular historical situation is not propitious for such a vast undertaking. Absolutely nothing but a futile martyrdom could possibly result now from a head-on collision with the terminal State, the megacorporate information State, the empire of Spectacle and Simulation. Its guns are all pointed at us, while our meager weaponry finds nothing to aim at but a hysteresis, a rigid vacuity, a Spook capable of smothering every spark in an ectoplasm of information, a society of capitulation ruled by the image of the Cop and the absorbant eye of the TV screen. In short, we’re not touting the TAZ as an exclusive end in itself, replacing all other forms of organization, tactics, and goals. We recommend it because it can provide the quality of enhancement associated with the uprising without necessarily leading to violence and martyrdom. The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can “occupy” these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace. Perhaps certain small TAZs have lasted whole lifetimes because they went unnoticed, like hillbilly enclaves—because they never intersected with the Spectacle, never appeared outside that real life which is invisible to the agents of Simulation. [...] Getting the TAZ started may involve tactics of violence and defense, but its greatest strength lies in its invisibility—the State cannot recognize it because History has no definition of it. As soon as the TAZ is named (represented, mediated), it must vanish, it will vanish, leaving behind it an empty husk, only to spring up again somewhere else, once again invisible because undefinable in terms of the Spectacle. The TAZ is thus a perfect tactic for an era in which the State is omnipresent and all-powerful and yet simultaneously riddled with cracks and vacancies. And because the TAZ is a microcosm of that “anarchist dream” of a free culture, I can think of no better tactic by which to work toward that goal while at the same time experiencing some of its benefits here and now. [...] The TAZ is an encampment of guerilla ontologists: strike and run away. Keep moving the entire tribe, even if it’s only data in the Web. The TAZ must be capable of defense; but both the “strike” and the “defense” should, if possible, evade the violence of the State, which is no longer a meaningful violence. The strike is made at structures of control, essentially at ideas; the defense is “invisibility,” a martial art, and “invulnerability”—an “occult” art within the martial arts. The “nomadic war machine” conquers without being noticed and moves on before the map can be adjusted. As to the future—Only the autonomous can plan autonomy, organize for it, create it. It’s a bootstrap operation. The first step is somewhat akin to satori—the realization that the TAZ begins with a simple act of realization.

The language seems “sexy” and seductive with its simplicity and inciteful/insightful “edginess”. It appeals to the demand to see *some* change now. For many years, I only knew those types of verses and, in the early 90s, the author felt like a kindred spirit. Yet, as I eventually discovered, in addition to the more well-known “festal purposes” of the “anarchist dream” cited above, Bey/Wilson also stated quite openly other potential purposes such as:

**Some Poetic-Terrorist Ideas Still Sadly Languishing in the Realm of “Conceptual Art”:** Paste up in public places a xerox flyer, photo of a beautiful twelve-year-old boy, naked and masturbating, clearly titled: THE FACE OF GOD.

**Against the Reproduction of Death:** I sometimes express myself as an anarchist boy-lover [...] My position is this: I am all too well aware of the “intelligence” which prevents action. I myself possess it in abundance. Every once in a while however I have managed to behave as if I were stupid enough to try to change my life. Sometimes I’ve used dangerous stupefiers like religion, marijuana, chaos, the love of boys. On a few occasions I have attained some degree of success—& I say this not to boast but rather to bear witness. By overthrowing the inner icons of the End of the World & the Futility of all mundane endeavor, I have (rarely) broken through into a state which (by comparison with all I’d known) appeared to be one of *health*. [...] Existence itself may be considered an abyss possessed of no meaning. I do not read this as a *pessimistic* statement. If it be true, then I can see in it nothing else but a declaration of autonomy for my imagination & will—& for the most beautiful act they can conceive with which to *bestow* meaning upon existence. Why should I emblemize this freedom with an act such as murder (as did the existentialists) or with any of the ghoulish tastes of the eighties? Death can only kill me once—till then I am free to express & experience (as much as I *can*) a life & an art of life based on self-valuing “peak experiences,” as well as “conviviality” (which also possesses its own reward). [...] I recently attended a gay dance/poetry performance of uncompromising hipness: the one black dancer in the troupe had to pretend to fuck a dead sheep. Part of my self-induced stupidity, I confess, is to believe (& even feel) that art can change me, & change others. That’s why I write pornography & propaganda—to cause *change*. Art can never mean as much as a love affair, perhaps, or an insurrection. But...to a certain extent...it works. [...] Only the dead are truly smart, truly cool. Nothing touches them. While I live, however, I side with bumbling suffering crooked life, with anger rather than boredom, with sweet lust, hunger & carelessness...against the icy avant-guard & its fashionable premonitions of the sepulcher.

These mentions of pedophilia (or “pederasty” and “boy love” as Bey/Wilson preferred to term it) appeared almost invisibly and innocuously amid the various rantings yet anarchist historian Bob Helms has documented a number of such instances including Bey/Wilson’s contribution to the journal of NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association).<sup>3</sup> Bob wrote “Peter Lamborn Wilson (who writes at least as often as Hakim Bey and makes no secret of the pseudonym), uses anarchism in an ethically warped, opportunistic way by pretending that adult-child sex is a natural freedom” and quoted from an early poem by Hakim Bey entitled “My Political Beliefs” which explicitly tied his definition of anarchism to the opportunity to have sexual relations with children: “O for a libertarian isle of runaways! O goodnight Moon, I am lost, actually lost without him [...] Pretend it’s a manifesto instead. Down with School! Boy Rule OK! In the land of dreams No governance exists But that of anarchists and kings, for dreamers have not yet learned to vote or think past the unfurling of the moment. [...] My liege shatters all Law for a triple kiss.” Bey/Wilson dates the ages of some of the boys whom he sexualized as young as age 10. He translated poetry by Abu Nuwas in *O Tribe That Loves Boys* (1993) as he celebrated pedophilia in other times/cultures while attempting to use examples from ancient Greeks, Muslim contexts, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg to justify his own advocacy of the practice. Bob wrote: “This is not ‘spiritual anarchism,’ [...] It is paedophile opportunism.” Bob quoted Bey/Wilson’s “clearest anarcho-paedophile statement” as follows: “it has taken on a tantalising reality and filtered into my life in certain Temporary Autonomous Zones an impossible time and space and on this brief hint, all my theory is based.” From this, Bob concluded “What he means by this is that he

<sup>3</sup> See Bob Helms, “Leaving out the ugly part—Hakim Bey/Peter Lamborn Wilson”, <https://libcom.org/book/export/html/1455>

*really has sex with children, rather than leaving the matter to fantasy, and that this is his purpose when he preaches anarchism.*" I cannot say if pedophilia actually did constitute the primary driving force behind Bey/Wilson's vision of TAZ but he certainly made it sound that way and, even if it didn't, the two visions seems concordant in that regard—a quest for autonomy to "do whatever one wants" so to speak. By declaring children "autonomous" agents as well, he could fabricate an ethical justification for doing things with them that they could not fully comprehend. Whether one calls it "rape" or "violation", it certainly entails an inordinate and unequal power dynamic, at the very least, in which someone more powerful engages in unjustified persuasion and seduction of someone far more vulnerable and susceptible to implicit (or explicit) coercion.

I dwell on this point to highlight some key problems with TAZ: what happens to power and hidden hierarchies in the fog of a sudden "autonomy" and the absence of convention, norms, and "authority"? What drives the organization of group activity when individuals gather under the auspices of self-satisfaction? If bodily pleasure and personal experience take such a primary role in the conception of "anarchy" then where does that leave those who have less power than those who consciously or unconsciously steer the course of events through physical, intellectual, class, gender, racial, or other advantages?

## Histories Ahead and Futures Gone

Prior to TAZ, two broad and potentially complementary wings of anarchism had developed: anarcho-primitivism (e.g., *Anarchy and Fifth Estate*) and libertarian socialism/anarcho-syndicalism (e.g., Noam Chomsky/IWW). Although the two did not generally mix well, they had the potential to fill in some of the gaps that each of them bore. The Situationist movement of the 1950s and 60s included elements of both and Bey/Wilson drew on all these predecessors as well in his pan-anarchic embrace of all things potentially anarchistic. He emphasized an "unmediated" life, direct, with as much *active experience* as possible and as little *passive spectatorship* as possible. His texts generally aimed to bring anarchism as close as possible to a person's life, away from abstract ideals or dreams of a distant revolution far on the horizon. These values informed his conception of the TAZ.

Reclaim the Streets (RTS), Reclaim the City (RTC), illegal Raves, Occupy Wall Street, Burning Man, the 2020 "Free Capitol Hill" action (aka the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone—CHAZ), and other actions and scenes have all drawn inspiration directly or indirectly from TAZ as articulated by Bey/Wilson. In this sense, it seems easy to see (a) what types of impact the TAZ has had, and (b) the extent of that impact. (For the record, the formation of Black Blocs preceded TAZ).

Despite the apparent success, usefulness, or importance of some of those movements, I ask here if the extent to which TAZ inspired them also served to derail potential anarchist organizing (whether primitivist or syndicalist) *away* from long-term and potentially effective struggles and more *toward* short-sighted, ill-planned, and ineffective *experiences*. In their best moments, they affected media discourse and gave individuals amazing and inspirational experiences of how we might organize life differently. In this sense, I do not completely dismiss the significant value of such enterprises but I do wonder if, by placing proportionally more energy there than in longer-term struggles and gradual organizing, we got our priorities mixed up, if, as with a drug addiction, we got sidetracked from our initial goal.

I (admittedly) have very limited experiences with such event precisely because I have never found them likely to achieve any significant goal. For example, I attended

Occupy protests in Europe but saw them quickly deflate and cannot see that they accomplished anything whatsoever (in contrast to the Occupy movement in the US which at least had *some* effect on changing the dominant narrative regarding wealth distribution). Also, during a European Social Forum (ESF) event in which local activist worked and planned for many months to create a successful forum, I witnessed first hand how other TAZ-oriented activists essentially hijacked the forum by declaring a Reclaim the Streets (which conveniently required minimal organization). I attended the RTS which consisted of roughly 400-600 people who marched about 300 meters before meeting a police blockade. After about 30 minutes of chanting and music, someone started throwing bricks at store windows and, within a few minutes the crowd and police exchanged blows and the crowd ran backward, trashing windows along the way. I (without a mask) walked alongside a group of masked stone-throwers and asked a masked kid in his teens why he did it. He said he did it for “anarchy”. I asked how he expected the smashing of windows to lead to anything aside from more police. He didn’t have an answer.<sup>4</sup> A bigger, angrier member of his crew then shouted at me: “We’re not here to talk. You’re either with us or against us!” So my buddy tugged on my shirt and we left. The crew seemed mixed with a couple Swedes and a few immigrants from, seemingly, Muslim background. Regardless of their background, however, they all shared one thing in common: excessive male testosterone. I saw no women throwing stones, no one I recognized from the city or neighborhood, and tons of macho aggression that seemed purely focused on destruction and the *experience* of rebellion rather than constructing any sort of positive change (as the other ESF activists had worked so hard for).

Anyway, after the RTS, the headlines the next day, of course, focused on the destruction of property, the economic consequences, and the fights with the police. The workshops and accomplishments of the ESF including one of the biggest demos the city had ever seen got far less attention. Yet the RTS action tainted the ESF labor nonetheless.

Not everyone, however, saw the RTS chaos as something negative. Michael Hardt, co-author of *Empire*, spoke the next day before a large audience of hundreds of people and showered praise upon the apparent uprising of the “multitude” as embodied by the “disenfranchised masses” who revolted during the RTS. I spoke up and called bullshit (he hadn’t even attended the RTS and clearly knew nothing about the testosterone-fueled dudes whom he romanticized). His platitudes furthermore dishonored of the people whose work had given him the platform to speak. He couldn’t even see how the RTS had undermined the work of the ESF (I also knew some of the ESF organizers who couldn’t hide their great disappointment of how the RTS hijacked media attention and cast a negative light on the ESF).

I don’t tell this story to praise the ESF and malign the RTS. The ESF and the entire Social Forum movement has had serious problems and they have not taken an anarchist stance. They too have accomplished little (for quite different reasons than TAZ/RTS). However, their model of steadfast organization seems far more productive and conducive to long-term success than placing one’s hopes in short-term experiences and street battles with police over “autonomy”. If, for example,

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<sup>4</sup> A couple months later, I saw that kid again at a demo. I recognized him by his eyes. As it happened, I knew someone who worked at his school so we all stood and talked a bit. Turned out that his parents came from Iran and he did have an interest in anarchism—partly through my buddy. He said that he had gotten to thinking about what I said and regretted smashing the windows. He seemed like a sweet guy. But he hadn’t learned much about anarchism more than the dramatic images that Black Bloc and TAZ had produced. And I would have hated to see him caught by the police that night...

demonstrators engage police to oppose a corporate pipeline, a poll tax, or the demolition of a cultural center, then people fight for a specific, shared, and potentially justifiable cause. I guess I don't see as much use in abstract or experiential goals...

## Whither Statelessness?

Here we come to my main question regarding the conception TAZ: does fighting for “autonomy” or “anarchy” derail long-term work into brief orgasmic experiences that leave the movement generally screwed rather than pregnant with potential?<sup>5</sup>

I don't see it as either/or but as both/and. Yet, I ask about *proportion*. We need both the here-and-now as well as mundane long-term struggle. But what guides our vision through these? I take an example from a recent moment of insight during what some people might also call a mini-TAZ: a mosh pit at a punk concert. In that mosh pit (a practice that pre-dated TAZ), we smashed into one another but—despite recent trends toward violent machismo—the ethic reflected old school values of care and compassion. No windmill of fists or karate kicks. Everyone stopped to help anyone who fell down. The pit consisted of one-third women—none of whom seemed disappointed or injured. That pit embodied a wildness but also courtesy and respect.

And I think *that* guides a successful movement far more than the values of “autonomy”. Instead of “Temporary Autonomous Zone” (which, to me, seems more often like a tease—TIZ, Temporary *Insanity* Zone), successful movements seem to aspire toward Areas of Respectful Consideration (ARCs). I know “respect” and “consideration” do not sound particularly dangerous but if some of the biggest threats to the state consist of creating more effective, local, and enduring alternatives then these values might guide us more usefully than seeking “autonomy”.

I often used to wonder what people sought in their quest for “anarchy” or “autonomy”. How did they think the state actually hindered them? At least for white folks, it often seemed to boil down to things like wanting to smoke pot or getting naked in public. Quests for “autonomy” have not seemed to typically translate into working toward adequate health care, wealth distribution, building alternatives to incarceration, or ecological sustainability.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, organizing around values of respect and consideration may help create spaces that welcome diversity, provide safety, foster stability, and enable the premises upon which various people can and *want to* work together for long-term social change. Not new *rules*—just a voluntary compass set on “respect” rather than “autonomy”. Who would *you* want joining your new commune: someone looking for “autonomy” and “anarchy” or someone prioritizing “respect” and “consideration”?

I wrote “*further* derail” in the title because it seems to me that the term “anarchism” (no ruler) may already have started a derailing process. “Syndicalism” pointed in a relatively clear direction (worker control over workplaces and a vision for a federation of worker-led cooperatives forming the basis of societal decision-making rather than the state). “Primitivism” pointed in a pretty clear direction too (abolition of most technology and leading simpler and more ecologically sustainable lives). But

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<sup>5</sup> I first wrote this as a statement. But I realized that I liked Socrates more for his questions than answers. After all, I don't know if TAZ actually derailed anything or not but it seems a decent question.

<sup>6</sup> Occupy did embody and build on social justice concerns yet TAZ represented only one (small) aspect of it. Its social justice-oriented concerns came more from places such as *Adbusters* or David Graeber's work than Bey/Wilson. In contrast, Burning Man led hundreds of thousands of people to experience trade without money. A major contribution of “autonomy” quests perhaps. However, participants pay big money to experience “life without money”, billionaires have co-opted it, and its impact hardly matches dozens of Catholic Worker houses that operate on similar principles on a daily basis.

does “anarchy” (no rule) really provide much clarity? No wonder we have terms like “anarcho-capitalists”, “relationship anarchy”, and “post-anarchists” when we really mean “Wealthy People Rule in the Name of Freedom”, “Non-Monogamy”, and “People Who Cite French Philosophers That No One Understands”. Libertarian socialists (and anarcho-syndicalists) generally embraced the term “anarchist” yet, in turn, that term provided an ambiguous ideological umbrella for self-proclaimed “egoists” like Max Stirner and the psychopathic nihilism of Sergey Nechayev. This led more “reasonable” anarchists such as Leo Tolstoy to reject the term. Yet, even while the term “anarchism” offered an unsustainable and incoherent ambiguity, it nonetheless retained European figures and ideas as central prototypes—*however one defined it*. And this, in turn, ironically left all stateless indigenous societies outside of the fold of Anarchism Proper because they had not “sufficiently” theorized their lack of statehood or their opposition to it. In other words, if you go to an anarchist book fair, you will likely see work by white psychopaths like Nechayev sooner than anything by or about any indigenous person from the same era. Although times have begun to change in this regard (thanks in part to the Zapatistas), Eurocentrism remains implicit in the term “anarchism”. Perhaps with assistance from primitivist perspectives, clarity about distinctions between European conceptions of libertarian socialism and indigenous stateless societies might help build bridges between them without either conflating them or focusing on one at the expense of the other?

As with forming a longstanding commune, indigenous societies have sustained themselves for millennia without states by means of respect and responsibilities—not quests for autonomy. We gather and build communities and societies on the basis of caring about and for one another—not primarily for the sake of bodily pleasure or a sensational *experience* but for the sake of sustaining *life*, life in all of our relations between one another, between our larger Self (world) and smaller self (body), between ourselves and the soil we use, the nonhuman animals we cohabitatem with, the plants and fungi around us, the air we share, and the water we drink every day. Any stateless community would still face those needs (which tend to get fulfilled by hierarchy and force and/or by shared senses of responsibility and commitment). Yes, Burning Man has given us amazing works of art. But if we think about the cost of an entry alone (a minimum of \$1,500), do not those *experiences* seem like luxury dancing on the labor of millions of people/workers still lacking basic needs? Reflections of society’s larger insanity? Whose autonomy benefits at whose expense during the flights and car transits to the desert? If even a mosh pit of drunk punks pick people up off the ground, can we not figure out better ways to organize our inspiration and vision for a better more equitable world than searching for yet another TAZ/TIZ?

Subsequently, I suggest less TIZ and more ARCs—and MOSS (Mobilization Of *Sane* Spaces). More looking to take on responsibility and consideration while also keeping an eye out for when others exert inordinate power over others. More creativity in how we communicate and relate than in the material technologies we use. Sanity expressed in tending to the *basic needs of everyone first*. Words don’t necessarily have much authority but sometimes they themselves exert an inordinate amount of power over how we think, what we choose, and how we organize.

So I don’t know the ultimate effect of “TAZ” or “anarchism” on our thinking and organizing, but I do wonder what direction an ARC-ism could take.